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Hockey in Sweden and Finland: The European Game is Better

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SPORT AND SOCIETY FOR H-ARETE
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It was just about a year ago that I sat in a bar in Halifax and listened to a former Canadian hockey player explain that the European game, sans red line, was not a more open offensive style of hockey than that played in North America. After watching the tremendous hockey on display at the Olympic games last February I doubted the validity of the analysis. Over the last week after seeing two games, one in Sweden and one in Finland, I am even more skeptical of those defending the red line.

On October 10 Djurgarden defeated Malmo IF, 4-1 in a Swedish Elitserien game at the Globen Arena in Stockholm, a medium sized state of the art arena and the home ice of the Djurgarden Falcon. I was amazed by the skating and passing executed on the open ice in European hockey. It made this game a spectators delight. The pace was tremendous in every respect. Not only did the players move up and down the ice with great speed, but the game itself had very few stoppages of play.

The passing was crisp, the skating was strong and fast, and there was nothing of the clutch and grab that creates what at times looks like a quagmire in NHL arenas. From my bias it was hockey as it should be played, revealing both the skills and the aesthetic beauty of this marvelous sport.

It was early season and the crowd was less than capacity at the arena, but the teams played with remarkable precision. The fans were enthusiastic, with many people wearing their team sweaters and with a contingent of considerable size having made the five-hour trip from Malmo for the game. Both teams occupy places near the bottom of the early season standings. Nonetheless the brand of hockey was more than you could ask for even at mid-season form.

A few nights later we traveled from Helsinki to the suburb of Espoo to watch the Espoo Blues take on Jokerit of Helsinki in the SM-Liiga, the elite of Finnish hockey. Espoo is a relatively new city with a population of 215,000 and is described at the Blues web site as a city without a center. I take that to mean it is part of the vast suburban sprawl that is so common across the industrial world. The Lansiauto Areena is only a few years old and the capacity

crowd of 6875 produced an electric atmosphere for this urban/suburban rivalry.

Sitting at the top of the league standings Jokerit dominated the game after the first period that ended in a 1-1 tie, with Jokerit ultimately winning 5-1. In that wonderful hockey phrase, the Blues were humiliated in their own building.

Again the hockey was of a very high quality. More physical than the game we saw in Sweden, this exhibition of the sport was still considerably less physical than the North American game. The Jokerit offence was explosive as they were just a shade better than the Blues in every aspect of the game: a half-step faster, a bit better with the stick, sharper passing, stronger defensively. The result was predictable. Still it was a pleasure to watch.

As for the arena it is a marvelous facility with excellent sight lines, a compact and intimate feel, and extremely comfortable padded seats which are wide and feature considerable legroom. If they turned Orlando Arena management loose here they could put in another 1500 to 2000 seats with no problem whatsoever.

The crowd was quite interesting. We happened into seats in the middle of the Espoo booster section with most people wearing Blues jerseys, hats, and/or scarves. A large drum was situated at the end of our row and it was beat quite intensely and non-stop until late in the game. The crowd chanted "Espoo, Espoo" incessantly, and every time the chant weakened someone wearing blue ignited it again. A considerable number of Jokerit fans were scattered throughout the stands, a few even in our highly partisan section, and there were no fights or disturbances. The crowd was quite intense without being rowdy or obnoxious.

After the Blues scored their only goal we instantly found ourselves under a huge Blues' flag that covered the entire section. After recovering from the surprise I did my best to add to the flapping of the flag from under the blue dome.

Again this game moved at a very quick pace with very few offside calls and rapid movement up and down the ice. Although there was an occasional push or shove after the whistle I can remember only one small incident where anyone

launched a fist in anger. There was also one gratuitous tripping incident which although late in the game still drew an immediate penalty.

The LansiAuto Areena featured a dance group situated at one end of the ice on an elevated stage. The Blues Show Girls performed a rather lame set of disco steps during most stoppages of play. It should be added however that at no time was there any music played during the course of hockey action. We were sitting at the other end of the ice behind the goal and although there was a net in front of us I didn't notice it until well into the game.

All in all these two games were a great deal of fun, an interesting experience in Swedish and Finnish crowd behavior, and proof positive for me that the European game without the red line and with minimal physical play is superior to that played in the NHL. The skill levels in these two leagues for these four teams were quite high, and given that only Jokerit was a top team in either league, I take this level of skill to be typical of these leagues.

While at the ballet in Sweden between hockey games I was reminded how that art form so closely resembles athletic skill at the highest levels. The necessary body control and conditioning demanded in both disciplines, as well as the aesthetic appeal of each done at the highest level, came home quite clearly for me during this extraordinary week traveling in Scandinavia.

I haven't seen so many Minnesota faces since the last time I was in Minneapolis.

On Sport and Society this is Dick Crepeau reminding you that you don't need to be a good sport to be a bad loser.

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